

African Community Traditions Can Support Better Mental Health Treatment

“Mental health is an issue that affects Africans daily. More distressing is the fact that there is so much stigma and superstition attached to it that it is an area that continues to hold the continent’s public health sector back.”- Ida Mboob, 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow, The Gambia

Community resources to promote mental health and treat mental illness are scarce in Africa, as they are in most developing world countries. With professional resources limited, it’s important for individuals to recognize the possible signs of mental health issues in their friends and families, according to Mandela Washington 2014 Fellow Harriet Yayra Adzofu.

“I tell families to look out for withdrawal from social activities that were previously enjoyed by the person. For example, loss of interest in school, work or sporting activities.”

A psychiatric nurse at the Accra Psychiatric Hospital, Harriet works directly with people suffering from mental disorders and their relatives. She offers some practical advice to the YALI Network about how to spot the danger signs for mental illness in a family member:

- Change in sleep or eating habits.
- Complaints of unexplained physical ailments, such as fever, headache, abdominal discomfort, etc.
- Social isolation.
- Unusual fear, anxiety, irritability or restlessness.
- Complaints of low energy or fatigue.
- Talking to one’s self.
- Unrealistic beliefs about one’s social status or capabilities. For instance, a student suddenly says he is the president.
- Neglect of personal hygiene.
- Long periods of over excitement or sadness.
- Thoughts of death or suicide.
- Complaints of hearing voices or seeing visions.
- Substance abuse.
- Confusion or lack of concentration.

Harriet also works in the community in mental illness prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. She also works to to empower people in her community to live healthy lifestyles.

Besides the support and understanding that caring family members can provide, other social qualities and communal traditions inherent to African cultures are potential resources to help people with mental health problems, according to a U.S. psychologist.

“Natural supports exist for a person through community or faith-based organizations, and the notion of shared responsibility for a person,” said Paul Sachs. “African communities, particularly in smaller towns or villages ... are more attuned to this.”

Sachs, a clinical psychologist, is with NHS Human Services of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, an organization providing therapeutic care to patients with a variety of special needs. After a 2012 trip to Africa, he was a consultant in the establishment of a Ghanaian nongovernmental organization dedicated to addressing mental health issues. (See the For All Africa Foundation below.)

African storytelling traditions can be another important asset in addressing mental health issues, Sachs said. People who have experienced mental health disorders and treatment “have amazing stories to tell. Storytelling is a way that they can give their chaotic experiences greater coherence.”

The United States and other developed countries have progressed in their understanding and sensitivity about mental health disorders, a process also underway in Africa, Sachs says.

Nongovernmental organizations and volunteer counseling services are being organized in many countries. A brief guide to these services follows.

[For All Africa Foundation](#)

Africa Mental Health Foundation

International Association for Suicide Prevention

Befrienders Worldwide (volunteer action to prevent suicide)

Suicide.org

LifeLine South Africa

Important Facts About Mental Health

[Meet the Fellows: Robert Nkwangu](#)

By Robert Nkwangu, Uganda, Public Management, Morgan State University

Robert Nkwangu has seven years of experience working in issues related to children, youth and people with disabilities (PWDs). Currently, he is working with the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda (NUDIPU) representing youth with disabilities, the Uganda Society for Disabled Children (USDC) and the Kampala Capital City Youth Council. His tasks are to ensure that youth with disabilities are given equal opportunities at all levels, both in government and in civil society. He also chairs the Finance Committee of the NUDIPU Board of Directors.

He previously worked as a job support and political officer with Handicap International. Nkwangu has been deaf since the age of 6 and uses sign language and interpreters to communicate but can do some lip reading. He finalized the research thesis for his master’s degree in social sector planning and management from Makerere University, Kampala.

Upon his return from the Washington Fellowship, he hopes to mobilize young people, especially the marginalized PWDs, to raise their voices, advocate for inclusiveness, promote their human rights and form groups with unique initiatives so as to benefit from the many opportunities available to them.

Photo credit: Robert Nkwangu
